Romancing the Acropolis

An Exhibit from

The Benaki Museum

Athens, Greece

At the Parthenon

Nashville, Tennessee

April 29 – July 26, 2008

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…At last I was promising myself a state of permanent intoxication in a land where the smallest rock appears to the imagination to be inhabited by gods and heroes."

Comte deChoiseul-Gouffier
1782

Introduction

For generations Greece and its once-noble city of Athens was, to the European mind, the backwater of the Mediterranean, unimportant except as a convenient stop for pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land.

The *rediscovery* of Greece by European monarchs emerged during the 16th and 17th centuries as palaces became more elaborate and royals raced each other to fill these enormous structures with the world's antiquities. Archaeological excavations, including those at Pompeii in 1748, ignited European interest in ancient Greece and reawakened western thought to the Hellenic impact on culture and civilization. By the 18th century, the classical education had become the standard for excellence in study and intellectual thought among aristocratic society on both sides of the Atlantic. The simultaneous rise of the English Society of the Dilettanti, whose mission was the promotion of Greek taste, led to an influx of archaeologists, classicists, architects, artists and poets swarming over ruins and lamenting the demise of classic perfection. *"Good taste was born under the sky of Greece,"* gushed one art historian in 1755. Among the first to entice Europeans with drawings and images of Greece were artist James Stuart and architect Nicholas Revett (whose images are included in this exhibit). Sponsored by the Society of the Dilettanti, the duo identified and carefully measured and sketched details of the ancient temples, monuments, and works of art that had been assaulted by mankind and then abandoned to time and the elements.

In sharp contrast to the outpouring of respect and admiration for the ancients was the plunder and abuse to which these masterpieces of art and architecture were subjected. Plunder in the name of King and country, plunder to fill the holdings of museums that dotted the capitols of Europe, plunder for the egos of the aristocracy and the rising middle classes of the 18th and 19th centuries. The antiquities of Greece lay defenseless under the indifference of a crumbling Ottoman Empire whose immediate needs were monetary and whose next negotiated *arrangement* could be spiced up by adding access to Greek treasures.

But as with the love of the beautiful Helen of Trojan tales, the love of ancient Greece and all that it represented lured its lovers – the classicists, artists and poets – to romanticize the Hellenic image beyond the point of writing about her to the point of sacrificing lives and fortunes to her.

Sources: Fani-Maria Tsigaku, *The Rediscovery of Greece* (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Brothers Publishers, 1981); Tsigzku, essay, *A Romantic Vision of Greece,*

The following lesson plans meet national curriculum standards for grades 9-12 for *World History* (Era 3 – Classical Tradition, and Era7 –Age of Revolution); *Geography* (the application of geography to interpreting the past); *Language Arts* (using readings to understand the human experience); and *Visual Arts* (using visual arts to understand history and culture).

Lesson 1: Romancing the Vision

Goal: ***To bring students to an understanding of the interplay of Athenian ideals with landscape and architecture in framing a culture and in revealing the values and vision of that culture to future generations.***

Activity 1:

The vision that propelled 5th century BCE Athens to educational, cultural, and artistic prominence in the ancient world was largely that of the city's leader, Pericles. His name meant "surrounded by glory" and Pericles surrounded himself with buildings of monumental splendor and shaped the city to match his vision of a democracy that, through participatory government, raised its citizens to the level of noblemen.

Invite students to research the life of Pericles (for this portion of the exercise they may look at any of several good web sites profiling the life of Pericles) and the monumental architecture of the city and particularly that of the Parthenon. Two excellent web sites for exploring details of the Parthenon are: www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/Parthenon2.htm and www.debevec.org/Parthenon/ShotbyShot which includes four sequences of slides.

Ask students to describe the Parthenon as the embodiment of three classical principles, citing specific examples:

- **The Homeric vision of man as hero.**
- **The notion of symmetry as fundamental to classical architecture.**
- **The pursuit of *Kleos* (immortality and glory) as the true key to victory over death.**

Advanced Activity:

In his book, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, Yale classics professor Donald Kagan remarks "The Parthenon was meant to achieve visually what the *Funeral Oration* aimed at orally – the depiction, explanation, and celebration of the Athenian imperial democracy." (p. 161). Ask students to read Pericles' *Funeral Oration* and explain how the Parthenon visually achieves this goal.

Activity 2:

As students explore the (Nashville) Parthenon's exhibit of engravings, lithographs, and chromolithographs of 18th and 19th century Greece, the perspective of the artists reinforces the importance of the architecture with regard to its connection to the *topography* (the physical features of a place). In his book *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama remarks that *"Buildings like temples…should correspond to nature only insofar as their ideal forms demonstrated the harmonies and symmetries governing the structure of the universe."* (p. 530).

Few buildings in history demonstrate the harmonies and symmetries as does the Parthenon. Deliberate architectural refinements intensify lines and spatial relations, adding to the impact of the building. As explained by Dr. Kagan, these refinements "*vary from what the eye is accustomed to see in order to create a tension between what is expected and what is seen. The mind of the viewer is therefore compelled to grapple with the discord between expectancy and reality and to reconcile them; this sharpens the viewer's attention by requiring active involvement and heightens the liveliness, vitality, and lasting interest in the building."* (p. 163).

In addition to these carefully conceived and executed refinements, the visual impact of the Parthenon is closely associated with the landscape itself. Cities such as Thebes, Sparta, and Corinth had their own acropolis (high city) serving as a natural citadel. But the Athenian Acropolis was the most dramatic of these landscape features. Rising 490 feet above sea level, the Acropolis offers one of the world's dramatic landscapes as setting for the Parthenon. This natural pedestal compliments the Parthenon's elongated lines (8 x17 columns as opposed to the usual 6x14 columns associated with Doric temples). In color, combinations of parallel lines, and textured detail, the Parthenon reflects a kinship with the ground upon which it is built and becomes *topography elaborated*.

Ask students to select a local building (Nashville students might select the State Capitol) and to explore the interplay of architectural, historical, and topographical elements in reflecting local culture and values. Does the landscape setting for the local building allow a natural bond between the building and the ground or has the landscape been self-consciously designed?

Lesson Two: Romancing the Ruin

Goal:* *To help students understand the impact of ruin in shaping collective memory.

Look on its broken arch, its ruin'd wall,
Its chambers desolate, and portals foul:
Yes, this was once Ambition's airy hall,
The dome of Thought, the palace of the Soul:
Behold through each lack-lustre, eyeless hole,
The gay recess of Wisdom and of Wit
And Passion's host, that never brook'd control:
Can all saint, sage, or sophist ever writ,
People this lonely tower, this tenement refit?

Lord Byron
Child Harold's Pilgrimage
Canto the Second, VI, lines 37-45

Why do people fall in love with a ruin? What is the fascination with ruin and decay?

Activities: Below are several discussion questions to consider with regard to ruins and collective memory.

1) In a December 1988 article for *Traveler*, author Fergus Bordewich described the Parthenon as "majestic in collapse and the very epitome of our idea of a ruin." (p.21). Time, weather, plunder, and war abused the temple to Athena, considered one of the most beautiful architectural achievements in history. Today, surrounded by workmen and scaffolding, its walls vanished, its ceiling vanished, its goddess vanished, and its delicate sculptures mutilated or removed to foreign museums, the Parthenon continues to inspire, impress, and lure visitors, scholars, artists and poets to see and experience this ruined reminder of Athenian splendor. Why? What do visitors still receive from the shell of a structure? What transforms a ruin into an icon?

2) Architectural works divide, measure, and define space. The architecture of an era places structure within a historical context and provides visual evidence of a culture. But when time, the elements, or events severely alter or destroy that structure, or when the original view shed (the original landscaping surrounding the structure) is severely altered, does it continue to speak to the viewer? Invite students to discuss the effects of two ruins – the ancient Parthenon (see resources listed below) and the remains of Mississippi's famed Windsor Plantation (photographs of which can be viewed by using key words *Windsor Plantation)* with regard to the following:

- Inspires reflection
- Stimulates imagination
- Bridges with the past (culturally, politically, historically)
- Glorifies permanence and continuity while reminding us of the susceptibility to time and of our own mortality.

3) A ruin stands as silent testimony to lives and events. Ask students to consider the following issues. A ruin has its own voice, its own story to tell. At what point should we allow a ruin to remain as such, susceptible to time and the elements? And at what point

do we intercede to protect and preserve, restore or rebuild? For example, would rebuilding the house at Windsor Plantation in Mississippi have a stronger impact upon the viewer than the current silent stand of Corinthian columns? Do viewers insert their own imagined version of history at the site of a ruin? For example, Windsor was not destroyed during the ravages of the Civil War, but burned to the ground shortly afterward as the result of a cigarette. Does such knowledge alter or diminish the impact of the ruin?

4) When intervention is determined to be the proper step, is it ever proper to present a sanitized and *improved* version of the reality of place? For example, Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello was in a constant state of construction during his lifetime. Would he or any of his guests recognize the elegant and completed home viewed by visitors today?

If we look at the issue of intervention in regard to the restoration of the ancient Parthenon, do students think the long history of the site demands interpretation of *every* phase – as temple to the goddess during Athens' "Golden Age"; as the site of a Byzantine Church for a thousand years; as the two hundred year site of a mosque; or as the site's brief, but deadly stint as a powder magazine? In the restoration of any site, who decides the *correct* presentation of the history? Is restoration a modern presumption of space and meaning?

Historic sites and ruins play key roles in heritage and collective memory. Students should be aware that with place and collective memory, each issue resolved is apt to create new issues and problems. In the end, each visitor brings their own thoughts and experiences and opinions to the ruin.

Additional resources:
www.flikr.com This site offers a great selection of photographs. At the home page use the key word *Parthenon* to view photographs of both the Parthenon in Athens and the Parthenon in Nashville.
www.pbs.org/nova/parthenon. This site provides programming information as well as the Nova Teachers Guide to the recent Nova program, *The Secrets of the Parthenon.*

Lesson 3: Romancing of an Ideal

Goal: ***To familiarize students with the period of history known as the Romantic era and to show the impact of the arts and the influence of ancient Greece in defining and reflecting that era.***

The Parthenon represents the supreme effort of genius in pursuit of beauty.
Auguste Choisy
19th century French engineer

Background:

Romanticism emerged from frustration – socially, politically, and culturally – associated with a rapidly changing world of industrialization, population explosion, urban sprawl, and the long dominance of monarchs and aristocrats. In revolt against notions of *reason*,

the cornerstone of the Age of Enlightenment, the *people* gained new awareness of their own power, their own ability to impact or alter history, and to seize a moment to bring about change. The ability of thirteen small American colonies to declare and win independence from powerful England, of *citizens* to wrench power from the king and aristocracy during the French Revolution, inspired people in other lands, and created within and across borders a pride of nationalism. Within each cultural or societal grouping the mindset was changing. Suddenly, *our* history, *our* folklore, *our* music and art and traditions took on greater significance – not imposed from king and court, but rising from the grassroots level.

Activity 1: ***Transforming Words into Action***

They were intuitive as opposed to rational; spiritual in contrast to intellectually experienced; emotional as opposed to controlled. Within a growing climate of progress, industrialization, corruption, urbanization and rapid population growth/migration, they espoused the return to nature, the exotic, natural liberties, and the superiority of the primitive and the noble savage. They were the Romantics. In poetry, art, political philosophy and other human endeavors, their influence was wide-ranging and controversial, as were their individual lifestyles – the "bad boys" who sent women swooning, society gossiping, and raised the ire of traditional politicians and church leaders. They roamed the earth, writing, sketching, and often fighting and dying in locales far removed from the safety of their homelands. Many died young, sending ripples, then waves, then torrents of grief through homelands that both hated and loved them. Lord Byron only lived to age 36; Shelley died at 30 and Keats at 26.

Their faces were not made for wrinkles, their
Pure blood to stagnate, their great hearts to fail;
The blank grey was not made to blast their hair,
But like the climes that know nor snow nor hail
They were all summer; lightning might assail.
And shiver them to ashes, but to trail
A long and snake-like life of dull decay
Was not for them – they had too little clay.

Whom the gods love, die young…

Don Juan
(Canto 1V, stanza 1X and the first line of stanza 11)
By Lord Byron

The arts can inspire love, awaken the senses, encourage reflection, and bring a reader or viewer to a level of awe and wonder. Ask students to think about the purpose of two of the arts – poetry and visual art – during times of war or crisis and as barometers of and creators of social consciousness.

In the first portion of this exercise, students are asked to select and analyze poems from five time periods when poetry became a vehicle to raise consciousness, demand action, and build or reinforce collective memory. Students should be able to locate poems on the Internet using the site ***www.poetryabout.com*** followed by the words in bold listed below:

- **The Greek War for Independence** or **the Elgin Marbles**– select a poem from one of the Romantic poets. For longer poems such as Byron's *Child Harold's Pilgrimage,* or *The Curse of Minerva,* select a canto and a few stanzas within the canto.
- **The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)** - another war that inspired a generation of poets and writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, to bring the destruction of the war to readers and to inspire individuals from around the world to join the battle.
- **The Vietnam War –** this war marked a turning point in how generations of Americans viewed war. The poetry often morphed into song. The songs stirred young American on both sides of the issue.
- **The Civil Rights Movement –** a period in which the determination of people to reclaim their natural rights forced Americans to look into a mirror and determine whether or not who they were was who they should be. Based on the principles of non-violence, its efforts sparked violent reaction and night after night shoved the realities of inequality and injustice into the living rooms of Americans. The poetry, songs, and speeches continue to impact Americans and those in other nations who struggle for freedom and equality.
- **Post 9/11 Poetry –** a defining moment in American history. Few events found so much expression through the poet's pen at all levels of society.

The second portion of this exercise allows students to select and analyze one of the works of art listed below as a vehicle for raising consciousness, demanding action, and building or reinforcing collective memory. Before analyzing the selected piece of art, students should research briefly the historic event upon which the work is based.

- **The Greek Civil War**
  The Death of Botsaris by Filippo Marsigh
  Lord Byron's Oath on the Tomb of Marcos Botsaris by Ludovico Lipparini
  Missolonghi Fugitives by John Michel Mercier
  The Massacre of Chios by Eugene Delacroix
- **The French Revolution**
  Liberty Leading the People by Eugene Delacroix
  The Death of Marat by Jacques-Louis David
- **Napoleonic Occupation of Spain**
  The Third Man by Francisco Goya
- **The Spanish Civil War**
  Guernica by Pablo Picasso (This painting hangs in the United Nations Building in New York).

Lesson 4: Romancing War

Goal: ***To demonstrate the presumption of applying present-day thinking to historical periods.***

Brave and valiant Greeks, let us remember the ancient freedom of Greece,
the battles of Marathon and Thermopylae;
let us fight on the tombs of our ancestors who fell for the sake of our freedom.

Alexandros Ypsilantis (1821)

Background:

Born as a reaction against dynastic rule and hegemony (the rule of one state over another), *Romantic Nationalism* arose from the governed through growing awareness of unity in language, customs, religion, and culture and a demand for self-determination. The political and social upheaval often began as a trickle – a speech here, a poem or rumor there – and quickly became a torrent of outrage against authority. Words, symbols, and images became powerful tools for marshaling citizens and enticing aid from other nations. Often, as in the case of the Greek War of Independence, the help came from individuals who offered funding or paid their own way to fight in the cause of freedom.

Students talk of the horrors of war or the futility of war. With the immediacy of modern communications, the selected images of war enter our homes and beam in streaming video across the Internet; we can play war with unbelievable realism on our Play-Stations™. Today's students look at war from the only perspective they have – a 21st century perspective. They often forget that 200-300 years ago soldiers were not an "Army of One," fighting alongside men they had only recently met. Our ancestors fought in militias rounded up locally and comprised of their neighbors, friends and relatives. The wealthiest man in the county organized and often funded the unit, a neighbor was "the Colonel," the guy alongside in battle was a kid brother. Not to fight for your home, your town, your county, was considered an act of cowardice. Kids grew up on heroic tales; their heroes were not athletes or celebrities, but warriors. Men proved themselves on the field of battle, and officers sent to some "god-forsaken outpost" to drill day after day and never taste "the glories of battle" feared for their careers and their sanity. Up until the horrors of trench warfare in World War One (The Great War), men whose mission lacked action in battle lobbied superiors, pulled strings, commandeered transportation, and volunteered in any capacity to get to the *real* battlefields.

In the cause of revenge, in the cause of honor, in the cause of freedom, in the cause of glory, in the cause of a myriad of words and mottos and images, men were willing time and again to line up and march across open fields in full view of enemy guns for "the cause." Single battle statistics were monstrous with numbers of 500, 1,000, or 12,000

dead and wounded not uncommon. In the 21st century our question to these ghosts of the past is "Why?" Understanding the why of this and other questions is the challenge and the goal of the historian. This lesson is not a critique or debate about current wars, but a literary and historical look at war over history and how the prelude to war, the wars themselves, and the post-war periods were reflected through the emotion and beauty of poetry.

Activity 1: Romantic Views of Battle

In addition to the Romantic poetry connected with the previous lesson, students may further explore the role and power of poetry in bringing war (the call to arms, the intensity of battle, etc,) and anti-war views to the public. Ask each student to select a poem to read to the class. An excellent resource is the electronic version of Betty P. Bennett's *British War Poetry in the age of Romanticism, 1793-1815* (with digital text edited by Orianne Smith). Access this information by using the title as the key word in the search or by accessing the information at the following site: www.rc.umd.edu/editions/warpoetry/ . As students read and discuss the selected poems, find out the reason for their selections. What does this say about **their** views of war? Did having a family member or friend involved in the present conflicts affect their choice of poem? What images – brotherhood, community, sacrifice – weave through the texts and what do such words say about why men fight and die? What specific poetic slant (emotions, call-to-arms, battle description, symbolism, use of metaphor, etc.) affected their selections? Do students notice changes over time in the presentation of war through poetry or is there a universalism in tone and text and subject that is continuous from ancient poetry until the present?

Activity 2: The Last Romantic

In 1997, historian H.W. Brands presented Theodore Roosevelt as *The Last Romantic*. Through the lesson plans above, students explored various aspects and characteristics of a *Romantic* and explored issues, poetry, speeches, and works of art reflecting the essence of what it means to be a *Romantic*. Look again at Pericles' *Funeral Oration* from the 5th century BCE and then read the farewell speech of General Douglas MacArthur at West Point on May 12, 1962 (www.nationalcenter.org/MacArthurFarewell). Is romanticism limited to a specific period in history, or do students see Romanticism as a constant that weaves in and out of the tapestry of human experience?